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Chapter 04 - Printing as a Catalyst for Social Revolution

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Printing as a Catalyst for Social Revolution

-Alissa McAlpine-

In the 15th century English began to emerge as a language spoken in instructional settings, then spread into the political and academic worlds as well. Along with this development came a slow but steady rise in literacy in England and the world in general. While there were a great many social, political and religious influences on this development, none of them would have been possible without the invention of the printing press. The introduction of this groundbreaking machine to the English speaking world sparked a new literary age, which ultimately established the foundation on which future revolutions of religion and politics would be built.

Caxton's Printing Press

When printing was first introduced to England, the English language varied widely among its users. There were five distinct dialects, and even within these five groups spelling differed greatly, depending on the writer. While attempts were made by the Chancery of Westminster to standardize spelling in previous years, there was really no way to enforce any standard spelling rules. Then, with the advent of printing and the massive release of identical texts, it followed that the dialect used by the printers became commonplace, as it was what people were



16th Century Dialect Map¹

reading. William Caxton first introduced the printing press to England in 1476. He began his business in London, whose major dialect was that of the East Midlands.

Over time, East Midlands spelling became the standard, due to the fact that it was the most common dialect in which literary works were printed¹. On the surface, this was purely a literary change, but beneath the surface there were some significant political issues that arose as a result of this movement. It raised questions of “correct” versus “incorrect” English, mirroring the modern debate of “who” and “whom,” whether or not it is appropriate to end a sentence with a preposition, and so on.

English as a Formal Language

Until the 14th century, English was generally seen as a language only spoken by the common people. It was not refined. People of status would more often speak French and almost all political, religious, and scientific writing was done in Latin. However, with the advent of printing in London, English became a language of literature in addition to being commonly spoken among the working class. It gained more and more prestige but was ultimately still seen as a lower-class language. The general opinion that English as a language was inferior to the more formal languages was expressed by Caxton himself when he stated that he was translating a Dutch work “in to this rude and comyn englyssh².” There were attempts to make English a more formal language, and so some Latin spelling standards were adopted at this time in an effort to add prestige to the English language and make it more acceptable in high society. Many of these words are still in use today, which provides some explanation for the tremendously complex “sometimes, but not always” rules of English spelling.

French was the language of the higher class at this time, and so English adopted many words related to government, food, and entertainment from French. A few examples of borrowed words are “administer,” “ribbon,” and “innocent.”

The fact that Caxton’s works were spread among a wide audience with consistent spelling, grammar and punctuation gave his work authority, and in that manner his style came to be recognized as a “standard” for written

English^{3,4}. In addition, authors' individual writing styles were influenced by the broader exposure in the world and the faster production of written materials. The awareness that their work would be held under scrutiny by a wide array of intelligent people provided additional motivation to ensure that their work was of high quality and easily understood, which had a hand in the rise of linguistic standardization⁵. The effects of these efforts came to be realized quite quickly at this time with the emergence of the English middle class. Suddenly members of the upper-class elite found themselves socializing with people of different social and cultural backgrounds, and as a result the English language was transmitted through exposure. The increase in contact between the highest classes and more common people created an optimal social situation to foster a rise in acceptance of the English language. As a result, the courts were using English on a regular basis as early as 1356. Latin was still overwhelmingly used in scientific and medical fields, but the English language itself was well on its way toward becoming England's primary spoken language⁶.

Over time, these standards came to be accepted and eventually English became the language used in government in England. Of course, English wasn't perfect by any means. There was still some variation regarding spelling and the borrowed words from French and Latin certainly complicated matters, but that being said, it is undeniable that this was a period of significant change for the English language, and firm foundations were built on which modern standards have been formed. Without the introduction of the printing press during this shift of linguistic perspective, it is entirely possible that the tremendous variation with which people wrote and spoke would have prevented the kind of effective communication that led to the rise of independent thinking that is evident throughout the Renaissance.

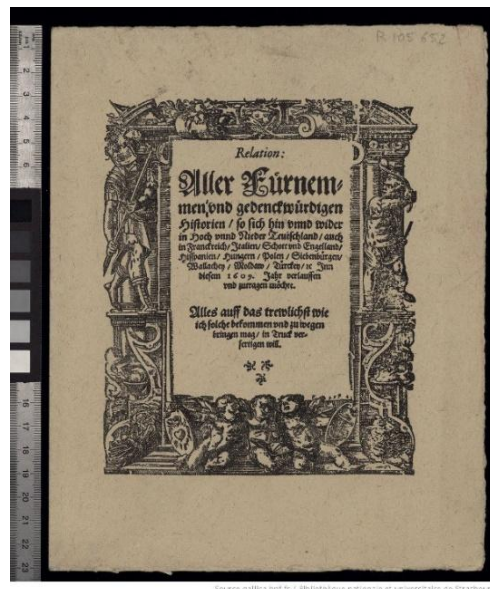
The Early Spread of Literacy

Given printing as a faster way of spreading information and the development of a somewhat standard spelling system, progressively more

people became literate throughout the 15th century. When the printing press was first introduced to England, only 5% of adults in the United Kingdom were considered literate. It is important to note that, given the fact that there is no official census data from this period to determine who was literate and who was not, historians rely on the ability to sign one's name as proof of literacy. As opposed to modern conceptions of literacy relating to the general ability to read, write, and comprehend, this means that at this point in history, only 5% of adults were capable of signing their name, let alone reading or writing more complex texts. Given increased access to printed materials provided by the tremendous increase in the speed of book production, the ability to read and write became a much more useful skill. By 1550 literacy rates in England had tripled. In the early 1600s education became an integral part of urban life in England and there was a sharp spike in literacy, rising to 53% of the adult population in 1650^{7,8}.

The Rise of the Newspaper

As literacy rates rose among the general population there was suddenly a fast and efficient way of informing the general public: through a regular printed work. The first newspaper in Europe was printed in Strasbourg, Germany by Johann Carolus in 1605. Entitled *Relation aller Fürnemmen und gedenckwürdigen Historien*, it was formatted as a book with text in one column⁸. At this time newspapers were printed weekly, eventually expanding to



Title Page of Carolus's Newspaper²

bi-weekly or even daily publications later on. Newspapers allowed the general public to stay in touch with important events, and this access allowed common people to feel more connected with the events of their time. Through this new

medium newspaper publishers were able to keep the public informed of current events, which was a crucial part of the political and social upheaval that was soon to follow.

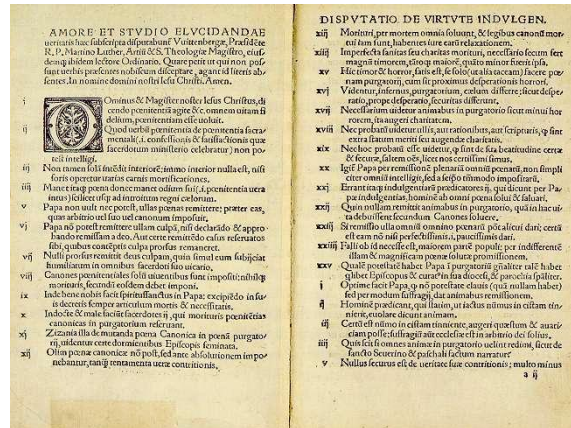
At this point there was already a strong system of censorship established throughout Europe, but the rapid pace of newspaper media made it more difficult for the church or government to keep tabs on what was being printed. Their careful attempts to control the spread of information were shown in the choice of many newspapers to print articles about things that were happening farther away in order to avoid retribution by censors⁹. One of the most significant impacts of the advent of printing was that, in a way, it made the world a smaller place. Cheap and easy access to printed pamphlets and newspapers allowed the general public to be more involved with larger events in the national or global communities. The ability to read opened people up to ideas that they simply would not have been exposed to in the world before printing.

Pamphlets and the Spread of Social Agendas

Among the new possibilities posed by the printing press was the idea of a printed pamphlet containing information or opinions. They typically consisted of several sheets that were loosely bound together with paper covers. These pamphlets were published throughout the world, but were particularly common in England, France, and Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries. They contained religious, social, scientific, and political writings that authors and printers wanted to make available to the general public. They were relatively cheap to print (in comparison with longer works printed with higher quality materials) and so were also cheap to distribute. Through these pamphlets various people were suddenly able to make their perspectives widely known, and this ability was used to promote a variety of disruptive ideas. They abounded in the early 16th century in the religious setting, with many writers working to spread support for religious reform¹⁰.

Martin Luther

One of the most commonly cited revolutionary pamphleteers of the 16th century was Martin Luther. He is credited with starting the Protestant revolution in Germany when he nailed his “95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” to the door of a Catholic church in Wittenberg in 1517. In this work, he argued that only the scripture is authoritative and generally challenged the power of the Pope.



Martin Luther's “95 Theses”³

These writings eventually got him excommunicated from the Church, but that ultimately led those who agreed with him to break away from the Catholic Church and establish Protestantism¹¹. After originally posting them outside of the church, the “95 Theses” were printed and disseminated to the masses, which sparked a time of widespread religious upheaval and eventually led to the rise of the Protestant church. Mechanized printing allowed him to make enough copies of his work to spread it to the surrounding areas and create a strong body of support from the populous¹².

It is important to note that there was unrest within the Catholic Church prior to this point. Luther was one of many individuals who spoke out against corruption in the Catholic Church at this time, and there were certainly a number of other important figures in the instigation of the Protestant Reformation. However, Luther's publication of the “95 Theses” came at a time when the political situation was ripe for revolution, and the availability of

printing as a means to quickly spread his ideas led to his movement being the spark that was needed to ignite the Reformation¹³.

Women in the Printing Industry

These developments in the religious world demonstrate the power that the printing press held to spark revolutions, but other areas of the social environment were also strongly influenced by the new ability to quickly produce and distribute printed works. For instance, Europe was firmly established as a patriarchy in the 16th century. Women, in general, did not work outside of the home and were often viewed as political pawns. The rise of the printing industry, however, created an opportunity for women to start to be heard more and more. In addition, printing created jobs that women could take outside the home that were socially acceptable.

Up until this point there were women who could read and write and did so frequently, but these women were almost always members of the highest social classes and their ideas were not viewed as equal to those of men. It is also important to note that female literacy rates were drastically lower than those among men. This changed somewhat as general literacy rates rose, but it remained highly uneven despite these developments. Some women chose to write and publish under a male pseudonym in order to be taken more seriously. Some recognizable names from the 18th century such as George Elliot and George Sand were pseudonyms for female authors who preferred to publish under a male name¹⁴. This practice continued and evolved with the advent of printing, allowing for women to release their ideas to the public. With the new print culture, women were involved with the production of books in all areas. Writing, printing, stitching, binding, and distributing were all acceptable fields in which women could participate. While true centralized efforts for gender equality would not arise until much later, the change in attitude that surrounded the establishment of the printing industry allowed for a change in political station on the part of women in general¹⁰.

One example of the varied roles women played in the printing industry is in *The Mother's Legacie, to her Unborne Childe* by Elizabeth Jocelene, which had women involved in all of the processes of writing, printing, and publishing.

Printing and the Social Environment

Printing in and of itself had a wide range of significance within the social spheres from its conception through the Renaissance and even into modern times. It allowed greater access to information on a global scale and fostered the kind of intellectual curiosity that sparked events such as the Protestant Reformation, the industrial revolution, and political revolutions worldwide. The linguistic developments brought about through printing are also significant. The rise of the printing press created a baseline by which to establish a standard of the English language, which then shifted with other social and political pressures and slowly became the system we know and use today. The adoption of this new technique and the explosion of mechanized printing procedures revolutionized the way information was disseminated, and forever changed how the world perceives the spread of knowledge.

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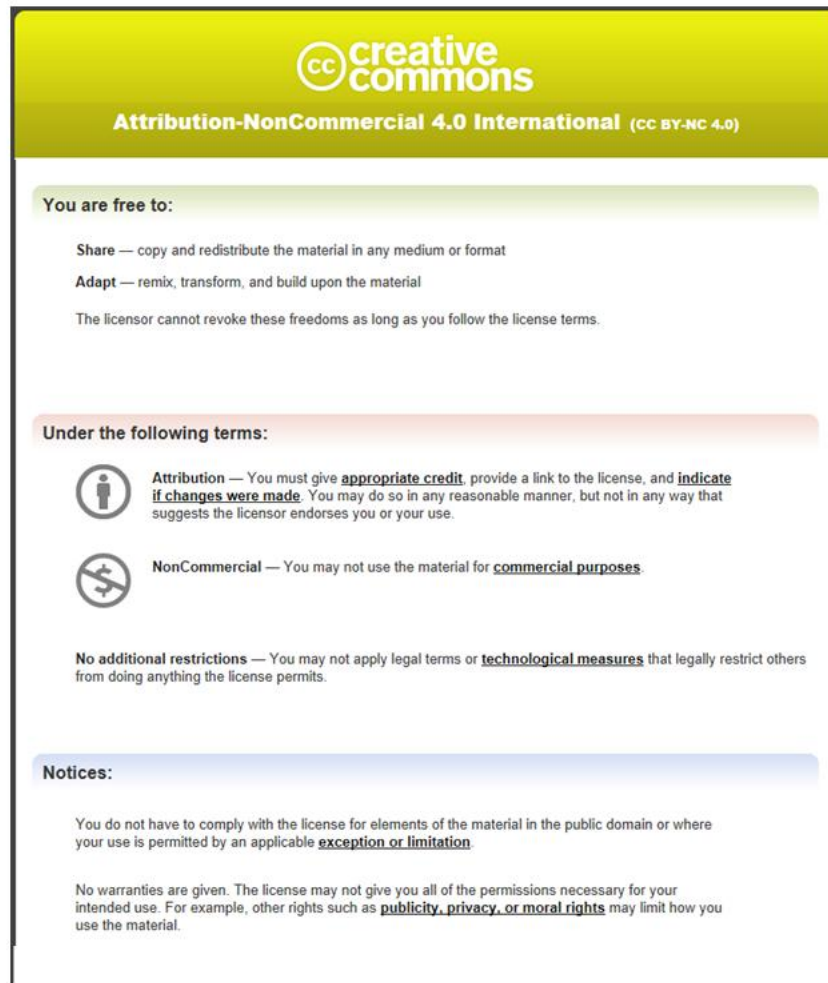
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